



The ambiguity of Chinese energy investments and possible environmental impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative

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China's influence around the world has grown considerably in recent years, as it has accumulated financial reserves that now generate substantial state-directed investments and developments, with a notable emphasis on the infrastructure sector. As China is becoming a global economic power, such investments cause trade friction with some countries, mainly with the United States. In addition to financial impacts, these investments can cause numerous environmental impacts. From 2013 on, China increased the integration of those investments under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which bets on the development of land and sea routes through several countries, mainly in Europe, Africa and Asia.

Because of the high investments in infrastructure, there are enormous environmental impacts, which are the focus of this research, to discuss the expansion of China's environmental impact in BRI countries through the economic driver of infrastructure investments in the initiative. To this end, we start from a review of the political geography concept of the *heartland* coined by Mackinder (1904/2004) and recently discussed by Chen and Fazilov (2018), directing our literature review to the environmental implications in scientific and media articles over the last five years, to discuss it in the light of the Risk Society (BECK, 2016).

The BRI is a strategy of economic expansion, spreading environmental risks of economic development, but also disseminating values and visions with transformative potential in infrastructure development. We consider in this research, that the rise and



expansion of China through the BRI, and especially the increasingly diffuse risks to the environment brought about by such infrastructure are among the events that will most change the international and environmental scenario of the XXI century (WEINS; FERREIRA, 2019).

In addition to infrastructure impacts, the issue of energy impacts is addressed as an indicator, since one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gases today is coal-based energy, which is part of several high investment projects that are part of the BRI. While financial institutions around the world are moving away from coal to limit exposure to increasing environmental and health risks of assets, there is Chinese financing of more than a quarter of the coal plants currently under development outside their borders, totaling USD 36 billion in 23 countries (PIKE, 2017).

Therefore, this article comprehensively demonstrates the environmental impacts caused by Chinese investments within BRI countries, in terms of territorial issues, biodiversity and investments in infrastructure and greenhouse gas emissions through the energy sector. This structural development is in apparent contradiction to the Ecological Civilization doctrine by which the country has been restructuring its institutions towards a kind of sustainable development with Chinese characteristics since the 17th CCP Congress in 2002. The analysis through the Risk Society framework indicates how this development can be understood through a cosmopolitan perspective and see them as an opportunity for international norm generation (BLOK, 2018).

Keywords: China; Belt and Road Initiative; Environmental impacts; Infrastructure; Energy.

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